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NIO/EUR
22 July 1986ITALY: THE PCI AT A CROSSROADS?

The Italian government crisis offers the PCI some opportunities to turn around their declining fortunes. Prospects are remote for PCI inclusion in a governing coalition, at least in the near term, but Party leaders are actively pursuing other urgent goals and using the government disarray to those ends.

The PCI's main goals are to:

- overcome internal problems due to more than two years of domestic isolation and electoral decline; and
- move its "Euroleft" program toward respectability at home and in NATO capitals.

Party strategists are banking on a continued struggle between the Christian Democrats (DC) and Socialists (PSI) to strengthen the PCI's position on the Italian left. Hence the Communists have given PSI leader Bettino Craxi their full support in his struggle with the DC, believing that his obstructionism will also make more difficult the reconstitution of a viable five-party coalition.

- PCI leaders are divided over medium-term objectives. Some want the PCI to seek participation in a so-called "democratic alternative" government with the Socialists; others would welcome a return of a Christian Democratic rule, with the PCI remaining in opposition.

Either way, the PCI stands to benefit from a prolonged and bitter test of wills between the DC and PSI.

If discord among their chief rivals causes the Socialists to go out of power and increasingly take more radical stands, the Italian Communists can more effectively pursue a "Euroleft" strategy. This approach combines a strong PCI affirmation of Italy's place within Western Europe and the Western alliance system with continued, but muted, criticism of the US over the state of East-West relations and US use of NATO bases in Italy for out-of-area crisis deployments.

- The "Euroleft" maneuver recently got a new Soviet blessing. Last month, Dobrynin relayed Gorbachev's admiration for the PCI's efforts to actively seek cooperation with the European left. This approach, Gorbachev added, would contribute to international detente and lend a "helping hand" to Soviet foreign policy initiatives.

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PCI leaders will also be seeking approbation among Italy's NATO allies of the PCI's new international posture. In this regard, the PCI's repeated efforts to send a high-level delegation to the US acquires added significance.

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